MILE-END HIPSTERS AND THE UNMASKING OF MONTREAL’S PROLETARIAN INTELLIGENTSIA; OR HOW A BOHEMIA BECOMES BOHO

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The usefulness of “hipster” as an epithet in the context of Montreal carries with it a legacy that gives it some purchase among those who are “in the know.” The hipster as characterizing a distinctively urban dilemma is not a new phenomenon; in fact, it can be traced back to the Beats and their disdain for those misguided individuals whose allegiance to Beat ideals were seen as inauthentic, spurious and faddish. We may well be aware of Norman Mailer’s characterization of the moral radicalism of the hipster (Graña, 1990), but the etymology of “hipster” remains the subject of speculation. Ned Polsky (1967), speaking of the Beats, notes the following regarding the term “hip”:

(All) are in the dark about ‘hip.’ The few Village beats with any opinion suppose that it comes from the ‘hep’ of early 1940s jivetalk. Actually ‘hep’ and ‘hip’ are doublet; both come directly from (all) are in the dark about ‘hip.’ The few Village beats with any opinion suppose that it comes from the ‘hep’ of early 1940s jivetalk. Actually ‘hep’ and ‘hip’ are doublets; both come directly from a much earlier phrase, ‘to be on the hip,’ to be a devotee of opium smoking—during which activity one lies on one’s hip. The phrase is obsolete, the activity obsolete... (Polsky, 1967: 149)

To be “hip,” or “in the know,” then remains a distinctive quality of the true Beat. A “hipster,” initially a term that valorized the outsider, the outcast and the disenfranchised, soon emerged in the late 50s and early 60s as a term of disparagement, a way of demarcating the moral and ethical space of exclusivity the Beats were intent on mapping out. This urban cartography of cool was both spatial and social. Clubs, bars and scenes with the taint of the hipster would become verboten, sacral spaces and events sullied by the wrong class of outsiders whose appearance anticipated the inevitable absorption into a mainstream they had worked so hard to symbolically, materially and socially distance themselves from.

The hipster as characterizing a distinctly urban dilemma is not a new phenomenon; in fact, it can be traced back to the Beats and their disdain for those misguided individuals whose allegiance to Beat ideals were seen as inauthentic, spurious and faddish. We may well be aware of Norman Mailer’s characterization of the moral radicalism of the hipster (Graña, 1990), but the etymology of “hipster” remains the subject of speculation. Ned Polsky (1967), speaking of the Beats, notes the following regarding the term “hip”:

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As other subcultural types soon took over the city, and we can think here of hippies and punks, the hipster soon receded into the background during the 60s and 70s in North America. Recently, however, the hipster has become resplendent, entering into debates and discussions on-line and in urban alternative weeklies. Websites such as Time Out New York (Lorentzen, 2007), Pogpamatters (Horning, 2009), Adbusters (Hadow, 2008), various print magazines and newspapers, alongside countless blogs, have all recently attempted to engage with the hipster as a symptom of the cooptation (yet again) of alternative culture by mainstream, middle-class youth. One way to characterize this newly resonant hipster is to understand it in terms of the absorption of cultural capital.

This narrative of incorporation/excorporation, which Dick Hebdige describes at length in his study of punk (1979), relies on the media, in ways which both disdain punks and later neutralize their threat, primarily through the commodification of the style and the ideological absorption back into dominant paradigms (the family, for example). The contemporary hipster suffers the same fate, but through new channels of circulation that in turn have mapped out, and mapped on to, a bohemian moral geography. Mailer’s moral radicalism has been rendered a virtual caricature and translated into a distinctive global template, with specific iterations realized through local alternative media and on-line community forums. Another way to consider the demonization of the hipster can be tied more explicitly to the shifting political economies of contemporary urban culture. Thus, the caricature of the hipster as threat can be understood not only in relation to its mediated, symbolic power, but can also be read as symptomatic of the changing face of the city. In this sense, the significance of the hipster as urban folk devil points towards considering their role in cities which have increasingly focused on the power of culture as a driver of the new symbolic economies. In a recent essay on the kinds of spaces found in Berlin, for example, sociologist Hartmut Häußermann talks about the city’s cultural textures, its “mythographies,” which serve as a rich semiotic resource, a deep pool of literary, filmic, and musical texts and references that fostered a sense of a city deeply self-aware of its history as Canada’s “bohemian hub. The kind of ambience musicmakers in the 1990s were seeking to cultivate was sourced from the city’s long history as a subcultural epicentre in North America. This relies upon the city’s cultural, linguistic and ethnic mix, an urban mosaic which has sedimented out from its vibrant jazz culture in the 1920s, its lively art scenes of the 1940s, its disco culture in the 70s, its 80s hardcore culture, through to the mid-90s, with its active comics culture, open-mic poetry nights and a thriving indie scene. At the latter end of the twentieth century language issues, sovereignty debates and a long-term economic downturn, its notoriously cheap rent and the lowest tuition fees in North America drove away many of the non-white populations in shaping its bohemian ambience. It could be argued that Godspeed, and its attendant milieu, were caught in a sea change in the late nineties, and that their success, both locally and internationally, was a harbinger of the shift Montreal was soon to undergo. It was in the twilight years of the last century that the city became an idealized sanctuary for dozens of cultural refugees, most of whom had fled cities deemed too expensive and cultural voids (Toronto was a major point of exodus). The situation at the time created a sense of a city deeply self-aware of its history as Canada’s bohemian hub. The kind of ambience musicmakers in the 90s were seeking to cultivate was steeped in the city’s long history as a subcultural epicentre in North America. This relies upon the city’s cultural, linguistic and ethnic mix, an urban mosaic which has sedimented out from its vibrant jazz culture in the 1920s, its lively art scenes of the 1940s, its disco culture in the 70s, its 80s hardcore culture, through to the mid-90s, with its active comics culture, open-mic poetry nights and a thriving indie scene. At the latter end of the twentieth century language issues, sovereignty debates and a long-term economic downturn, its notoriously cheap rent and the lowest tuition fees in North America drove away many of the non-white populations. Montreal emerged at the time as a cultural hub, a city with nearly 20% unemployment, animated by French-English tensions, and a cultural life underpinned by universities.

But that was then and this is now. Many of the people involved in the scene at the time have since settled into Mile-End as store-owners, running bars and cafés, have become parents, professionals, etc. If for the last decades of the twentieth century Montreal’s economic failure provided the conditions for its fin de siècle cultural buoyancy, the upswing in its fortunes in the early twenty-first century established a different kind of framework into the city’s imaginary. It can be suggested, in this light, that the anglo-bohemian of the 90s was perceived by many at the time, and certainly since, as a benign ambassador for Montreal’s laissez-faire good life, while the seemingly more malignant hipster has lately come to represent the city’s new bohemian chic, in a way that has made that member of the previous scene decidedly uneasy with the current state of Montreal subcultural life.

For some, the scourge of the Mile-End hipster was precipitated by a now infamous story about Montreal’s music scene in 2005. Spin magazine did a cover story on the 90s music scene, with most of the artists that made up the city’s music scene at the time, including bands such as The Arcade Fire, The Dears, and others (Peres, 2005). As many of the more seasoned musicmakers suggested to me not long after the article was published, the story (while getting some of the geography of Montreal wrong) had
a strong impact on Montreal's cultural life, some of which was felt most acutely in Mile-End. Now, they told me, people were convinced they could come to Montreal and earn money through making music. One established record-label owner went so far as to suggest that the hipster “devours” the music scene in Montreal, with its false hope and empty promises of musical riches. This was their invitation to the Montreal scene, as hipsters soon became writ large on the Mile-End imaginary not long after its publication. The impact of the Spin article was both symbolic and demographic. Across the city and across North America began to see the city as a beacon of musical and subcultural bounty. Combined with Montreal’s resurgent economy, Mile-End for an established class of bohemians, like those I spoke to, was now becoming a victim of its success, where the marauding hipster hordes were seen as trampling an urban vision of subcultural splendour, best parodied in the romantic idyll of artistic suffering, unfolding in a milieu of easy-going ethnic pluralism, a view that has dominated Montreal’s mythology for the latter half of the twentieth century. This new wave of visitor was perceived as made up of interlopers and strangers, defiling the history and image of Mile-End and the orderness of its culinary spaces. The stranger as urban trope has a well-established history. Georg Simmel was one of the first to articulate the stranger’s role in the urban imaginary. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he wrote about the figure of the stranger as that kind of city-dweller who calls attention to the similarity and difference, nearness and distance, as uneasy, productive tensions that are distinctly urban in character. The spatial metaphor is an important one, and proximity and intimacy are aspects of life in the city that gives the stranger his or her resonance. Historically, the stranger, Simmel notes, has been tied to an entrepreneurial economy. New waves of immigrants must contend with their status as strangers, a constant negotiation of social, physical, and imaginary spaces, certain of which may be antagonistic and violent. In contemporary bohemian Mile-End, these tensions may engender acts of symbolic violence more often than not played out in the city’s alternative weeklies and on-line forums, where hipsters are construed as villainous clones. For example:

I live in Montreal, a city that has a whole borough devoted to hipsters, if you get trapped in Mile-End past about 8am in the morning prepare yourself for an army of apathetic, skinny jeans kids clutching 40s (cheap malt liquor) with their lanky fingers. Although far too anemic to pose a serious threat to your safety, these monsters will ridicule your baggy jeans, laugh at your third generation iPod, and shit elitism all over your relatively innocent frame. They’ll talk about how Devendra Banhart is the greatest musician of all time, smoke Native cigarettes, and rock more American Apparel than should be legally allowed on one person. (Literary Facial, August 1, 2008)

However, even as they figure into the Mile-End imaginary for some as figures of menace, sometimes this demonized hipster plays his or her part in providing the impetus for mapping out a neighbourhood ethos:

Next Monday, March 23, will be the last chance for Mile-Enders to sound off on what kind of Mile-End they want to live in. Is the ‘hood—which will face a serious change when the ground breaks on the coming St-Viateur E. revitalization project—too hipster heavy? Too little? Not green enough? Well served by development and public transportation, or not? (Montreal Mirror, March 19, 2009)

Here, the hipster is listed as agenda item, flagged as just one city issue among many, part of a litany of concerns that may shape Mile-End for better or worse. In Mile-End, not only is the hipster demonized, but has also entered the public sphere as something worthy of civic-minded consultation and debate. In his or her role as an ambiguous urban trope, the hipster works as an inverted riff on what Simmel refers to as the “possibilities of commonness,” whereby those opposed to hipsters develop framing and distancing strategies, simultaneously binding themselves together spatially, while also separating themselves rhetorically, socially and symbolically from the hipster. Of this kind of framing, Simmel says:

No matter how little these possibilities become real and how often we forget them, here and there, nevertheless, they thrust themselves between us like shadows, like a mist which escapes every word noted, but which must coagulate into a solid bodily form before it can be called jealousy. (Simmel, 1950: 407)

The hipster as the embodiment of envy is an easy surface reading as to why they figure in the way that they do. For those who dismiss the hipster, the impossibility of commonness is what has to be asserted here. In calling the hipster into being, and in giving it discursive shape such that it comes to represent the sort of consumption which seems out of the ordinary, extraordinary, needlessly ostentatious and remarkably homogenous (as many commentators suggest, they are often framed as wearing a certain uniform), the threat raised is one to an imagined gentility and restrained connoisseurship which otherwise characterizes the (proper) social life and dominant mode of consumption found in Mile-End, one which imagines living, working and creating in Mile-End to be oriented to the neighbourhood as a collective project. Simmel again:

People who have many common features often do one another worse or “wronger” wrong because the large area common to them has become a matter of course, and hence what is temporarily different, rather than what is common, determines their mutual positions. Mainly, however, they do it because there is only little that is different between them; hence even the slightest antagonism has a relative significance quite other than that between strangers... (Simmel, 1955: 44)

The hipster becomes an easily identifiable locus for anxieties about larger issues affecting Mile-End. For some, the inevitable trajectory of gentrification, moving from proletarian to immigrant to bohemian to bourgeois-bohemian, lurks not far beyond the figure of the hipster. Mile-End has played host to a range of communities (Jewish, Greek, Italian), but the hipster is read symptomatically of a new Mile-End, of musical riches. this was their invitation to the Mile-End imaginary not long after its publication. I really wonder where your odd obsession (sic) with “hipsters” comes from, especially as those are a transient group of people that will all be something else in 10 or 15 years. (Spacing Montreal, December 14, 2009)

Yes, this is concerning the expression MILE-END HIPSTER. Earlier on, it was Plateau hipster. It’s a little irritating, to put it mildly. I am not sure if it is the COFFEE BARISTAS or the Coffee Joes and...
Coffee Janes who have invented that expression. But we who live here know that 35 per cent of those who live on the Plateau or in Mile-End are at, or under, existence minimum level—in other words, WELFARE PEOPLE. We don’t think that you should censor the other brilliant types but, well, try to use that annoying expression a little less. Thanks a lot. (Anonymous, Montreal Rant Line, Montreal Mirror, November 16, 2006)

The hipster is both us and not-quite us, too close to call “Other,” here just another urban type that signals demographic shifts, ambassadors for change, but of what sort remains unclear and it is this which causes the unease. Cast as such, the hipster fits, at once with fuzzy ambiguity and with vociferous certitude, into a local sociospatial hierarchy, structuring a pattern of belonging to, and in, Mile-End. This particular folk devil, and like the moral panics their kind have generated in the past, the hipster becomes an uneasy but productive vehicle for mapping out spatial and social strategies of distinction, articulating a neighbourhood/neighbourly ethos, which in the subcultural marketplace that Mile-End has become means that the scene here must adhere to a preferred logic of consumption. The culinary space of Mile-End, with its bagel shops, Polish delis, Greek, Brazilian and Chilean restaurants, second-hand clothing boutiques, and Italian social clubs cum cafés, many of which not only frequented by, but in some cases owned by that earlier generation of bohemians, has long provided a site for easy, modest and laid-back consumption, encouraging what Alan Blum (2003) has referred to as an ability to live a life of quality, which in turn has lent the area a certain quality of life. As those last readers comments suggest, the anxieties and concerns expressed through the circulation and consequent demonization of the hipster calls attention to the slow process of social sedimentation and cultural refinement that has been part and parcel of how Mile-End has become habitable for earlier generations of entrepreneurs, families and countless “Others” that came later. In the end, there is some irony attached to their role in Mile-End imaginary as catalyst for local reflection, foregrounding how neighbourhoods are valued and neighbourliness evaluated, used as a point of entry into an emergent civic debate about the area’s past, present and future. In this capacity, there may yet be a use left for the hipster as modern day urban folk devil.

Works Cited:


